

The Economics of Peace: World War I and Scott Nearing's Radical America

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Scott Nearing's resignation from the University of Toledo in March 1917 marked the beginning of a transformation in his life. For the second time in two years the 34-year-old economist relinquished a teaching position on account of political and philosophical differences with his employers. After being fired from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School in 1915 for attacking industrial America's exploitive child labor practices and then asked to leave Toledo two years later because of his anti-preparedness stance, Nearing was essentially excommunicated from academia. Embittered by his pariah status and standing at a crossroads—jobless, an opponent of international violence under any circumstance, and increasingly socialistic in thinking—he embarked upon a campaign to expose the “hypocrisy” of America's industrial-capitalist establishment and its role in implicating the U.S. in a war of European imperialism. Nearing once wrote that his expulsion from academia allowed him to pursue “a new and larger field, a study of human society, its assumptions, principles, responsibilities, and practices,” pushing him “unceremoniously onto a new level of social usefulness.”¹ His trenchant views on capitalism and war propelled him to the forefront of the peace movement and the Socialist Party, while simultaneously earning him the scorn of liberal elites. Nearing's battle with America's privileged classes profoundly altered the course of “radical” activity in the U.S. during World War I and left a lasting impression on the country's intellectual, political and social culture.

Surprisingly, Nearing's personal odyssey during World War I has not been fully treated, and for the most part he is viewed both as an ancillary and divisive figure within the anti-war movement and as having only a minor influence on the

¹ Scott Nearing, *The Making of a Radical: A Political Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 136.

movement as a whole.² Two biographies offer insight into his involvement with peace groups and socialism during this period. Stephen J. Whitfield's narrative focuses generally on Nearing's public activism during the war, locating it within the larger "travail of dissent" of the twentieth century, and John Saltmarsh's more focused and comprehensive study addresses Nearing's philosophical roots and intellectual growth, while also tactfully balancing his "central incongruity" as both "public intellectual" and "private thinker."³ Neither of these studies, however, effectively engages his substantial role in fomenting anti-establishment values among socialists, intellectuals, students, and workers. The biographies faithfully reconstruct the spirit of Nearing's contributions as an agitator and a radical, but fail to capture the significance of his leadership within both the anti-war and socialist movements. As a supplement to these studies, what is needed is an analysis of Nearing's discursive and oratorical method and its impact on uniting radical activity during the pivotal war years.

Known among liberal academics as a scholarly maverick, Scott Nearing carved out a reputation as a staunch proponent of working-class values before the war, earning "him the enmity of powerful interests in the financial and industrial world."⁴ Nearing's radicalism developed rapidly after Woodrow Wilson's November 4, 1915 proclamation directing the nation to support military preparedness. Throughout 1916 and early 1917, he wrote and spoke openly about the proclamation's contradictions. He asked how the United States could call itself a neutral country and at the same time arm for the war and provide munitions to countries already participating in the bloodshed. He also appealed to workers directly, asking them what gains they stood to reap by supporting American industrial production for a war overseas, other than enabling widespread death and devastation. In a keynote address at a meeting of the Central Labor Union of Toledo, Nearing reminded his audience that, "The American people are committed people who do America's work. The people, as a whole, do not want war. Should

² See for instance C. Roland Marchand, *The American Peace Movement and Social Reform, 1898-1918* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); and Charles Chatfield, "World War I and the Liberal Pacifist in the United States," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 75 (7) (Dec., 1970), 1920-1937. Even when placed at the front of the peace movement, Nearing's ideas and actions emerge only in partial light. The best example of this is in Frank Grubbs's study on the struggle for working-class support waged between pacifists and the Samuel Gompers-led American Federation of Labor. In this account, Nearing's involvement with the People's Council of America for Democracy and Terms of Peace overshadows the diverse range of tactics he pursued in publicizing an anti-war message, linking the war to imperialist forces, and forging relationships with American wage-workers. Frank L. Grubbs, Jr., *The Struggle for Labor Loyalty: Gompers, the AFL, and the Pacifists, 1917-1920* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968).

³ Stephen J. Whitfield, *Scott Nearing: Apostle of American Radicalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), vii; John Saltmarsh, *Scott Nearing: an Intellectual Biography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 1.

⁴ *The Philadelphia North American*, June 18, 1915.

we fight for the capitalist traders? So much the greater fools, we.”⁵ Nearing also made an explicit connection between Wilson’s call for preparedness and Germany’s blockade of armaments to England, the United States’ biggest customer:

When England declared a blockade of Germany, American business said to John Bull: ‘It’s all right, we’ll sell to you.’ Now that Germany has threatened to do the same to England we are in danger of losing our market for munitions and are on the verge of war. It looks as if J.P. Morgan and Co. stands to lose their [sic] big bet on England to win the war and we must step in to help them win. If we go into this war it will be to make money...⁶

His critique of war as a capitalist conspiracy strengthened a fast growing domestic peace coalition that became gradually focused on eradicating two root causes of war: greed and ineffectual diplomacy.

Socialists such as Randolph Bourne, William English Walling, and John Reed contended that the fundamental cause of the war could be found in the conflict of economic interests. Walling, a moderate socialist, chastised “bourgeois pacifism” practiced by liberal progressives like Jane Addams. He argued that Addams’s Woman’s Peace Party, one of the earliest pacifist organizations, failed to consider “the great task that lies before us, namely, to find a way either in the near future or ultimately to bring the conflict of national economic interests to an end.”⁷ The so-called “bourgeois pacifists” argued, on the other hand, that in order to achieve peace a robust diplomatic internationalism must work to stem the tide of militaristic behavior mounting in Europe. For example, Walter Lippmann, an editor of *The New Republic*, argued that “the important point is that there should be in existence permanent international commissions to deal with those spots of the earth where world crises originate...such international governing bodies are needed wherever the prizes are great, the territory unorganized, and the competition active.”⁸ Technical criticisms aside, socialists were in fact able to collaborate successfully with bourgeois pacifists prior to American involvement in the war. As Thomas Knock writes, many socialists and liberals “regarded reactionary opponents of domestic reform and the advocates of militarism and

⁵ *Toledo Blade*, February 14, 1917.

⁶ *Ibid.*, February 14, 1917.

⁷ William E. Walling, “Socialists and Imperialism,” in *Towards and Enduring Peace: A Symposium of Peace Proposals and Programs, 1914-1916*, compiled by Randolph Bourne (New York: Garland Publishing, 1916), 34.

⁸ Walter Lippmann, “The Problem of Diplomacy,” in *Towards and Enduring Peace: A Symposium of Peace Proposals and Programs, 1914-1916*, compiled by Randolph Bourne (New York: Garland Publishing, 1916), 32.

imperialism as twins born of the same womb,” and to combat these insidious forces, they responded by combining their powers of protest.⁹

The formation of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) in January 1916 resulted directly from Wilson’s preparedness speech given in November of the previous year, and represented one such collaborative effort between socialists and bourgeois pacifists. The AUAM declared its intention to “throw...a monkey wrench into the machinery of preparedness and to stop the war through a conference of neutrals...”¹⁰ C. Roland Marchand notes that the AUAM at this time also began perpetuating the idea that “the battle between the people’s interests and the entrenched special interests...was now being reenacted in the struggle over military preparedness and war.”¹¹ Although not affiliated with the AUAM at this point, Nearing held similar beliefs about linking preparedness to “profit-hungry” capitalists. In *Poverty and Riches*, published in the fall of 1916, he concluded that, “as long as industry is being run for profit, the dollar will be put above the man. Grant the truth of this assertion and it becomes apparent that there is a fundamental conflict between the principle of democracy and the present system of industry for profit.”¹² He also delivered a series of lectures that fall in which he questioned why “The American people are being urged to ‘prepare.’ Is it preparation for peace or preparation for war?”¹³ Like many Americans, Nearing and the members of the AUAM were confused as to Wilson’s motivations in 1916.

World events moved at a break-neck pace in the first several months of 1917 and the picture became much clearer to socialists and pacifists: the American people were indeed being prepared for war. Irrespective of Wilson’s speech to the Senate on January 22, 1917, calling for a “peace without victory,” many socialists believed that the United States had already become too involved not to be drawn into the war. As the prominent New York socialist Morris Hillquit recalled, “as the war went on the ‘neutrality of thought’ was gradually abandoned in certain quarters, and voices began to be heard, speculating on the possibility of American participation. It is undoubtedly true that the change of sentiment was largely induced by the business interests...more and more entangled in allied arms.”¹⁴ Hillquit did not deny German intransigence as a genuine cause of war, but as a socialist, he could not accept unabated capitalist profiteering at the expense of millions of lives. Thus, the fundamental conflict between socialist-pacifism and

⁹ Thomas J. Knock, “Wilson’s Battle for the League: Progressive Internationalists Confront the Forces of Reaction,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations Vol. I: To 1920*, eds. Dennis Merrill and Thomas Patterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 565.

¹⁰ Quoted in Marchand, *The American Peace Movement and Social Reform, 1898-1918*, 241-42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹² Scott Nearing, *Poverty and Riches: A Study of the Industrial Regime* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1916), 255.

¹³ Nearing, *The Making of a Radical*, 110.

¹⁴ Morris Hillquit, *Loose Leaves from a Busy Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), 162-63.

bourgeois or progressive pacifism was set. Wilson's disciples, in general, found aggressive militarism to be the most unsavory and dangerous aspect of the world conflict. For this reason, they accepted his decree of February 26 to begin preparation for "armed neutrality" and his April 2 decision to put the nation on a footing for war. Socialists argued that Wilson had been duped by "big business," (even as German submarines sunk American ships) and they stood steadfast in their position that the pursuit of peace could be the only objective.

The two years of hospitable relations that existed between socialists and liberals ended on April 6, 1917, when the U.S. entered the war. Many prominent progressives, including *The New Republic* editors Lippman and Herbert Croly, the historian Charles Beard, and the journalist Walter Weyl, abandoned their commitment to the peace movement, believing that German militarism posed too great a threat to ignore. Moderate socialists, such as Walling, Upton Sinclair, Charles Edward Russell, and John Spargo also abandoned the cause. This left the American pacifist movement fragmented and disorganized. To save itself from disintegration, the movement, which had become increasingly militant in its outcry against war since the beginning of 1917, turned east to Russia for guidance. In spite of considerable instability within their country, the Russians took a step toward democracy in March 1917 with the dissolution of Czar Nicholas's regime. Although still participating in the war, an estimated one and a half million men had deserted their posts by the end of 1916.¹⁵ "New Russia," for all intents and purposes, began moving toward its ideal plan—a negotiated peace and an immediate cessation to the hostilities. This plan alone offered hope to an American peace movement that was quickly being undermined by a sudden lack of support.

March and April 1917 were transformational months on several levels for socialists and pacifists in America. From an international standpoint, the emergence of a democratic Russia set the stage for a clash of diverging claims to a new world order. The Americans determined that the only way to achieve meaningful peace was to stamp out militarism in all its virulent forms and to enter the fighting on the side of the allies. The Russians, urged by the allies to step up their waning military support, contended that only a peace-first attitude could cure the flare up of aggression and put an end to the hegemonic forces of war that "enslaved" the workers of the world. At the domestic level, both socialism and pacifism went from acceptable, indeed popular, movements to unpatriotic and subversive fringe movements. Reformer pacifists, such as Lillian Wald and Jane Addams (who, unlike Walling, held firm in their commitments to non-violence), and socialists were immediately targeted as radicals and forced to carry out their protests under the constant fear of repression. Finally, at the individual level

¹⁵ Lloyd Gardner, *Wilson and Revolutions, 1913-1921* (Washington, D.C.: University of America Press, 1976), 24.

Americans were called upon to make a “sacrifice” and unquestioningly advocate war “to make the world safe for democracy.”¹⁶ Most were exasperated with Germany’s belligerence by March 1917, and like the President, felt that the time for peaceful negotiation had ended. Yet more than a mere handful of Americans argued that war at any cost violated the principles of democracy, enriched industrialist “tyrants,” and further oppressed the working classes. Apparently not enthralled with the socialist-pacifist challenge to establishment prerogative, Americans chose war overwhelmingly, and in the short span of two months the temperament of the nation changed from tolerant to intolerant and from conciliatory to confrontational. With the line between pacifist and socialist deliberately blurred by American patriots who lumped all “un-American” behavior together, radicals looked to one another for reinforcement, and eventually, in November 1917, to the Bolsheviks and their socialist revolution.

Scott Nearing belonged to this latter group of Americans who thought that industrial “plutocrats” were largely responsible for plunging the nation into war. As a social scientist, Nearing tried to avoid being a “teacher with a doctrine,” someone who “was unable or unwilling to face new situations.” However, his mounting resentment for the war, for capitalism and for a careening world political situation allowed him to abandon previous fears of ideological rigidity; embracing socialism put him on a collision course with pro-war Wilsonian liberals.¹⁷ In a speech delivered to the Twentieth Century Club of Detroit, two weeks before joining the Socialist Party and just a few days before leaving his academic post for good, Nearing laid out the American crisis in stark economic terms:

The six or ten millions of men who would be thrown out of employment by the cessation of the war, would rise in revolution against the government which is responsible for their unlucky lot, and to prevent the disruption of the government, President Wilson has taken the only other course: immediate participation in the present conflict.¹⁸

By dispensing with a disinterested political posture, he freed himself to pursue an aggressive propaganda operation against the war. Two factors helped Nearing gain almost immediate notoriety within the anti-war movement: his oratorical skills and his ideas on education. In the first several months after the war, Nearing spoke publicly at a relentless pace. By his own estimation, he gave eight to ten lectures a week and up to four hundred a year during the war years.¹⁹ Secondly, Nearing came to the pacifist movement armed with a plan. Thematically, socialist ideals

¹⁶ Wilson uttered these famous words in a speech delivered to the Senate April 2, 1917.

¹⁷ Nearing, *The Making of a Radical*, 145.

¹⁸ *Toledo Blade*, March 10, 1917.

¹⁹ Nearing, *The Making of a Radical*, 68.

pervaded his anti-war rhetoric, but he tactfully integrated those ideals to encompass a broad swath of dissenters, including pacifists (conscientious objectors), socialists, non-socialists, workers, and students. His plan centered on a grassroots infiltration of the masses, which called for the dissemination of an extensive network of propaganda—public speakers, pamphlets, leaflets, discussion groups, and educational training—around the country. Upon joining the Socialist Party, he also took a position on the executive committee of the AUAM, where he began making his ideas known to its acting director, Roger Baldwin, a founder of the American Civil Liberties Union.

The most pressing goal for radicals after America entered the war was to quickly unite various individual pacifist groups that had been ravaged by a loss in membership. Many historians have pointed out that the movement suffered from too much diversity at the outset, which in the end foiled plans to reach a wide audience and harness momentum. Nearing, however, attempted to create a bridge for disparate interests to meet on common ground. Using his unique position as a hinge radical, moving fluidly between pacifist, socialist, and labor organizations, he advocated a program of inclusion whereby all three groups could articulate their grievances. When Vladimir Lenin wrote that “it is with ideas, not with armies, we shall conquer the world,” Nearing took it literally.²⁰ During the war he encouraged opportunities for radicals to engage in meaningful resistance together, rather than in isolation from one another. He laid out a prescription for unified action in his contentious anti-war pamphlet *The Great Madness*, published shortly after the American entry into battle:

The work of the people is cut out for them—cut out in all its stupendous importance. They must:—

1. Continue to meet regularly and systematically for the discussion of vital questions.
2. Publish a paper in every city that will be owned by the people and will represent them.
3. Capture the schools. The school system is the greatest single asset now in the hands of the plutocracy.
4. Establish industrial and political solidarity.
5. Educate! Educate!! Everywhere and upon every possible occasion in home, shop, streetcar, meeting hall.
6. Take out all profit out of industry.
7. Guarantee and maintain equal opportunity and justice for all.²¹

²⁰ Quoted in Scott Nearing, *Violence or Solidarity? Or Will Guns Settle it?* (New York: People's Print, 1919), 1.

²¹ Scott Nearing, *The Great Madness: A Victory for the American Plutocracy* (New York: The Rand School of Social Science, 1917), 44.

The directives issued here speak to Nearing's desire for a general platform catering to broad segments of the movement. He believed that the only way to combat the federal government's pro-war public relations assault was to counter it with an outpouring of propaganda that spoke collectively to these groups.

Before assimilating competing philosophies and strategies, however, it was necessary to craft a formal rapprochement between the variant strains of pacifism. The bulk of the AUAM consisted of progressive pacifists who favored a program attentive to ending militarism. They were concerned mainly with changing the structure of international diplomacy, repealing the Conscription Act of May 18, 1917, and ending the war on democratic terms. They did not want to become "a party of opposition" and emphasized that "we are not, by habit or temperament, troublemakers."²² American socialists, on the other hand, were combative at the start of the war. Emboldened by the initial Russian experiment in self-government and growing Bolshevik representation in the Provisional Government, they stepped up their attacks on the "liberal-capitalist" establishment, demanding a platform for international industrial reform. Socialists differed in focus from progressive anti-war demonstrators: the former wanted to attack the industrial elite, while the latter sought only to change existing diplomatic practices based on *Real Politik*. In addition to the concerns of the socialists and liberal-progressives—the two largest components of the peace movement—hundreds of smaller peace organizations made up of farmers, Christians, single-taxers, and local labor unions, each with their own agenda, threatened to be swallowed up by the great tide of patriotism sweeping the country. The problem was clear enough: unite or face extinction.

The First American Conference of Democracy and Terms of Peace convened on May 30 and 31, 1917 at Madison Square Garden in New York City in front of 15,000 people.²³ The conference aimed to bring together pacifists from all over the U.S. to discuss a program of unification. Led by Nearing, Louis Lochner and Rebecca Shelly, the latter two of the Emergency Peace Federation (EPF), planning for the conference began shortly after the American declaration of war. From the beginning, the moderate faction of the AUAM expressed its discontent with the strong socialist elements permeating the unification movement, which they argued only complicated the realistic goal of ending the war. As director of the organizing committee for the May conference, and a member of the American Union, Nearing defused the crisis with the simple suggestion that they pursue a more ecumenical program that joined forces to work "towards the establishment of

²² Quoted in Marchand, *The American Peace Movement*, 253.

²³ History and Organizational Information, People's Council of America for Democracy and Peace, box 1 3:1, Swarthmore College Peace Collection [hereafter SCPC].

industrial democracy in the United States after the war.”²⁴ The use of the term “industrial democracy” became a catchphrase within the peace movement, meaning different things to different people. For socialists, it meant replacing the capitalist political economy with a system of collectivization in which the “social machinery” transferred from the individual capitalist to the hands of the American working people. For the pacifist unwilling to accept socialist doctrine, industrial democracy could mean simply working to improve upon current international labor standards. Manipulating the language and the terms of unification kept most moderates happy. While the AUAM withdrew from the conference, it remained on the bill as a supporting organization, and many of its more radical members joined up with its sister peace organization, the EPF. Nearing’s contribution to this first conference went well beyond two simple words, but nevertheless, these words were symbolic of his willingness to find middle ground for all groups to meet on.

Out of the May conference grew a complete set of compromises that spoke to a national audience of peace groups. Although tension remained between radicals and moderates, they both agreed that for the time being the Russians had put together the most progressive peace plan. In the spirit of internationalism, they modeled their national peace organization after the Russian Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Delegates, a faction sympathetic to the Bolsheviks that held a position of power within the Provisional Government. The moderates were able to accept the Russian plan without reservation because of its universally democratic language. Socialism had yet to make its revolutionary inroads in Russia, and, in fact, the Wilson administration still praised the country’s implementation of democratic principles (they also cheered Russia’s labors in hope that it would stimulate a renewed vigor for the allied war cause).

The American pacifists called their organization the People’s Council of America, and their program advocated “an early, democratic and general peace in harmony with the principles of New Russia, namely: no forcible annexations, no punitive indemnities, [and] free development for all nationalities.”²⁵ Secondly, the Council urged substantive changes in the American approach to international diplomacy, as well as putting an end to the secret negotiation of treaties, conscription and the draft, the poor treatment of workers, and the curtailment of civil liberties. Finally, and most importantly, they called for peace through national referenda. The Council supported the opinions of its “constituents” in matters of international diplomacy and formulated “policy” after gauging their attitudes. If the

²⁴ New York State Senate, *Revolutionary Radicalism: Its History, Purpose and Tactics*; Report of the Joint Legislative Committee Investigating Seditious Activities, Filed April 24, 1920, in the New York State Senate, Vol. I (Albany, New York: J.B. Lyon Company Printers, 1920), 1037.

²⁵ History and Organizational Information, People’s Council of America for Democracy and Peace, box 1 3:1, SCPC.

American government failed to heed the voice of the people, the Council reasoned, then the only recourse would be to shift tactics from independent lobbying to mass, united action. The structure of the Council reflected that of the Russian “soviet” system, a flexible and decentralized body of state committees responsive to local council committees, but also had representation in the decision-making process at the national level of the organization. The national council acted as the chief generator of propaganda and education, providing uniformity to the pacifist message and direction to the massive alliance, which included, by June 1917, the full participation of the EPF, the Woman’s Peace Party, the American Legal Defense League, the American Association for Labor Legislation, the Non-Partisan League, the American Civil Liberties Bureau (bureau was changed to union shortly thereafter), hundreds of local labor unions, the Socialist Party, and the Socialist Labor Party.²⁶

From June through September 1917, Nearing served on the People’s Council executive committee in charge of labor agitation. His experience teaching economics made him the most qualified candidate to discuss in laymen’s terms the pressing crisis that war had thrust upon workers. During this period, he also taught full-time at the Rand School of Social Science in New York City and lectured extensively to national and local labor organizations around the country.²⁷ As the war dragged on into the fall, he grew increasingly uncertain about the merits of moderation in the pacifist movement. His experience with organized labor soured him on the prospect of a peace-first plan geared toward ending militarism. In his mind, militarism flowered under the exigencies of capitalist domination. Faced with the difficult task of trying to undercut the activities of Samuel Gompers’ pro-war and pro-capitalist American Alliance for Labor and Democracy, Nearing came to the conclusion that the People’s Council did not go far enough in providing a true alternative for workers. In order to obtain the socialist vision of industrial democracy, the terms of peace needed to be more closely tied to an anti-corporate agenda. In September 1917 he wrote, “Recent events lead me to the conclusion that it is *not the diplomats who want the war to go on but the business interests.*”²⁸ Nearing could no longer accept that militarism was due as much to diplomatic failure as it was due to plutocratic self-indulgence. This revelation is not in itself

²⁶ New York State Senate, *Revolutionary Radicalism: Its History, Purpose and Tactics*, Vol. 1, 1024-1037.

²⁷ The Rand School was a workers’ institute, catering exclusively to the needs of the uneducated and immigrant populations of New York and was openly connected to the Socialist movement. The School sought to provide workers with the tools to help “free” them from the monotony of wage-work and to encourage them to take ownership in the socialist political movement.

²⁸ “Open Letters to Profiteers: An Arraignment of Big Business in Its Relation to World War,” Unpublished Letter to the editors of *The New York Times*, September 22, 1917, Scott Nearing Papers, SCPC [his emphasis]. Nearing wrote five letters to the editors of *The New York Times*, which were never published. Instead, they were used in pamphlet form by the People’s Council and distributed widely to local People’s Council branches for sale to the public.

startling when placed side-by-side with his philosophic economism—the belief in the primacy of economic causes—and the fact that radical socialist power in the Russian Provisional Government continued to gain momentum. His opinions grew even more strident as he assumed the chairmanship of the People’s Council upon Morris Hillquit’s departure in late September 1917.²⁹

Nearing’s accession to the top position on the People’s Council represents the culmination of his transformation from liberal economist to radical socialist. It also marked the beginning of a new experiment in radical activity for pacifists, prefiguring the leftward political surge the movement experienced through 1920.³⁰ Publicly Nearing professed a united front among pacifists, telling the socialist *New York Call*, “It is the business of the People’s Council to find those points of probable agreement and thus establish a common meeting ground, a clearing house for the liberal and the radical elements in American life.”³¹ Under his direction, however, the Socialist Party played a much larger role in formatting the agenda for peace than he led on. The language of socialism gradually crept into the Council’s bulletins, sent out weekly to its members across the country, and he stepped up the challenge to Gompers’s Alliance for Labor. Nearing fired a shot at the Alliance one day after assuming the chairmanship: “...The American People are opening their eyes...they know that the big business forces have been trying to suppress the revolutionary labor movement in this country, while they folded to their bosoms a little group of labor politicians who are using the occasion to ‘clean up’ on their opponents.”³² Nearing no doubt had Gompers in mind when writing this polemic. In order to meet the Alliance head on, he attempted to set the Council’s program on a higher moral ground. He wanted to establish the socialist-pacifist cause as the cause of working-class freedom, removed from the “degeneracy” spawned by industrial capitalism, and as striving toward a greater good—the institution of industrial democracy.

The success of the Bolshevik Revolution lent credence to Nearing’s approach. Lenin and the Bolsheviks swept out of power the American-recognized Provisional Government led by Alexander Kerensky on November 7, 1917. Wilson

²⁹ Hillquit served as chairman of the People’s Council until September, but left that position to concentrate full-time on his 1917 New York City mayoral bid.

³⁰ This rush of leftist sentiment was most evident at the voting booth. From the East Coast to the Midwest, socialist turnout hit record numbers in the 1917 municipal elections. In New York City, turnout reached its all-time peak—22 percent of the city’s voters chose socialists—and New Yorkers elected ten socialist assemblymen, seven alderman, and one municipal court judge. In Milwaukee, socialists elected seventeen assemblymen and five congressmen, and in Chicago and Cleveland, they each sent two socialists to the city council. Through 1920, socialists maintained record membership numbers, peaking at 120,000 during the 1920 election. Historians, such as Daniel Bell in *Marxian Socialism in the United States*, often relate this rise in socialist popularity to the war crisis, but it also seems plausible that pacifist and socialist propaganda and a mass education program were equally as important.

³¹ *New York Call*, September 23, 1917.

³² “Open Letters to Profiteers,” September 22, 1917, SCPC.

and other prominent American internationalists chafed at Lenin's immediate calls for a negotiated peace between the European antagonists. When the Americans entered the war, they did so with the intent of crushing Prussian militarism. The Bolsheviks anti-war stance (consider rewording-awkward) and their decision to call back troops from the front lines at the end of 1917 thwarted this intention and raised fears of a possible conspiracy with the Central Powers. "The forces of movement" split into competing factions, with liberalism pitted squarely against revolutionary socialism.³³ Both the Americans and Russians proclaimed their desire for peace, and in Wilson's words, a "world made safe for democracy," but each sought different means to achieve their goal of creating a new form of diplomacy.

Nearing's reaction to these complex geopolitical developments on the domestic front is important in two ways. First, the Russian political successes provided a convenient opening for Nearing to bolster his criticism of American war profiteering and to further a program of agitation that connected the war to working-class oppression. Shortly after the Bolshevik seizure of power he wrote that the "whole question of war profiteering" bears "directly upon the 'economic rights' of the American people and therefore fall[s] within the scope of the People's Council program."³⁴ This statement conflicts with his earlier comments to the *New York Call*, in which he labeled the Council a "clearing house" for both radicals and liberals in America. Clearly, Nearing set out to separate the Council from the liberal program for peace by allying it with a Russian program that highlighted elements of class conflict. Secondly, the revolution legitimized the previous two decades of activity by American Socialists, augmenting domestic opposition to the Wilson Administration's wartime policies. The historian Charles Chatfield points out that some "pacifists supported the revolution, too, because its peace planks accorded with their own demand for a 'new diplomacy' embodying democratic principles such as freedom of press, petition, and speech," as well as a "progressive tax on war profits."³⁵ Even as the Council continued to ramp up its radicalism, some progressive pacifists remained loyal because they believed that the Russian peace program offered a legitimate, non-violent solution to the conflict. For dyed-in-the-wool pacifists, the Bolsheviks offered the most realistic plan for galvanizing worldwide support for democratic diplomacy, despite their socialist economic views. Although many pacifists, liberal or otherwise, did not

³³ Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917-1918* (New Haven: Yale Press, 1959), 1-14. Mayer develops his thesis around the political dialect between "the forces of order and the forces of movement." He asserts that the former group, comprised of France, Britain and Germany, supported an older, nineteenth century form of diplomacy based on power politics, where as the latter group, made up of the Russians and Americans, advocated a style of open diplomacy, which stressed popular control over foreign-policy making.

³⁴ *The Bulletin of the People's Council of America*, December 28, 1917, SCPC.

³⁵ Chatfield, "World War I and the Liberal Pacifist in the United States," 1929.

convert to socialism, they believed that the Russians honestly represented the people's voice. Since the preparedness controversy in 1916, they no longer trusted Wilson to do the right thing. As *Nation* editor Oswald Garrison Villard remarked at the time, "I am utterly discouraged and shocked and have completely lost my faith in Wilson...I simply feel that he is no longer to be depended upon..."³⁶

Playing on this current of mistrust, in order to spread the word about the Bolshevik peace plan, Nearing redoubled his commitment to educating the American worker about the benefits of socialism. His teachings to student-workers at the Rand School, the International Fur Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union in New York City played a significant role in developing a unified socialist educational method that attempted to undermine the effectiveness of Wilsonian internationalism.³⁷ Supplementing his seven-pronged prescription for pacifist activism delineated in *The Great Madness*, Nearing injected into the cause specifically socialist aims patterned after the Russian Revolution. The goal became not simply civilized activism, working through proper bureaucratic channels for peace, but urgent and abrupt mass action modeled after the Bolsheviks. Nearing wanted to take the People's Council's momentum in to a new stage, and he found in socialist doctrine the political weapon with which to make immediate, rather than gradual change. By fusing the revolutionary tone of socialism to the program of peace laid out by the People's Council, Nearing believed he could lift the masses upward toward change. Although he never explicitly advocated violent revolution, he did use the rhetoric of a revolutionary, as evidenced by this speech delivered to Rand School students in 1918:

So while we rejoice that the Russian revolutionists are breaking economic chains; while we send out good wishes and cheer to the German revolutionists as they throw off autocracy and set up a government of the people, let us not forget that expressions of good cheer are not the things that the Russian and German workers want from us. They want from us a Workers' and Soldiers' Council in New York City. They want from us a Workers' and Soldiers' Government in the United States. When we have established government, we will have made good our claim to brotherhood and comradeship with the workers of Russia and Germany.³⁸

The People's Council's founders copied the structural configuration of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council, but they did not mention anything about using this system as an alternative to American democracy. Nearing, yet again, increased

³⁶ Quoted in Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 1915-1916*, Vol. IV, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 50.

³⁷ New York State Senate, *Revolutionary Radicalism: Its History, Purpose and Tactics*, Vol. 1, 962.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, *Revolutionary Radicalism: Its History, Purpose and Tactics*, Vol. 1, 536.

radical America's challenge to liberal-capitalism. Peace for Nearing could only come with the end of exploitation, realized through socialism, and he continued to focus on cultivating a relationship with American workers.

Although Nearing did not have a working-class background he sympathized with the plight of the oppressed. He valued work, he once said, because "Everyone who works—whether joyfully or joylessly—is creating a product that will benefit a fellowman."³⁹ Like Eugene Debs, the entrenched father of American socialism and the symbol of agrarian radicalism, he believed every working man and woman held the key to the future of the United States. Secondly, he understood the importance of appealing to the values of the commoner. He learned this latter skill from Debs. The former Indiana rail worker possessed an uncanny ability to empathize with his audience, making them feel that he was communicating "not to people, but *for* them."⁴⁰ The *New York Call* reported on a 1908 rally at Grand Central Station in New York in which Debs, who was not opposed to using biblical metaphor, uttered what are now famous lines: "You workingmen have heads. You are satisfied to use your hands in the interest of the fellows who are shrewd enough to use their heads. Let me remind you that you have heads as well as hands. And when you use both you will be masters of this earth."⁴¹ Nearing employed similarly dramatic language throughout the war in effort to draw attention to economic injustices and "the ever widening chasm between those who possess and those who do not."⁴² Whereas Debs spoke *for* the people, Nearing spoke about what happened *to* the people as a result of the capitalist's "ill-gotten" war profits.

Nearing's consistent reaffirmation of purpose—connecting American business to the perpetuation of war and the disenfranchisement of the American worker—gave his discourse an uplifting quality, a "progressive" tone which suggested the unlimited potential of the human being, even in the face of the capitalist giant,

They are knowing—these mighty ones—in the affairs of the world, but in the things of the spirit they are like children. Knowledge they possess, but little wisdom. They do not understand the human soul. They underestimate the power of the ideal. They overlook the great longing—the terrible yearning—of the human heart, for truth and justice, liberty and joy and peace.⁴³

³⁹ *Toledo Blade*, December 1, 1916.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Charles Leinenweber, "Socialists in the Streets: The New York City Socialist Party in Working Class Neighborhoods, 1908-1918" *Science and Society* 41 (1977), 169.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴² *New York Call*, February 18, 1919.

⁴³ Nearing, *The Great Madness*, 42-43.

Nearing's vision of democracy placed knowledge and cooperation above gratuitous uses of power and privilege. In the context of war, the erosion of both democratic ideals and progressive notions of societal improvement appeared very real. Nearing seized on this fear with apocalyptic language, linking up socialist discourse with an image of America as a imperialist behemoth.

The Wilson Administration sought to placate public alarm over the war with reassurances that the U.S. was in fact fighting to guarantee the preservation of international democracy. Of course, they maintained a slight advantage in keeping their message in front of the people. With control of the mail, the backing of industry and major media outlets, and the force of the Espionage and Sedition Acts, the government fastened a tight noose on the spread of disagreeable information. Additionally, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), the government's aggressive war-boosting agency headed by former newspaperman George Creel, worked to drown opposition to Wilsonian doctrine. As Elizabeth McKillen suggests, the American Federation of Labor, under Gompers, also played an important part in suffocating radicals: "Gompers wore down his opponents through smear campaigns that questioned their patriotism and often linked them to German sabotage...he also had the power to deny his opponents any real voice in shaping AFL policy."⁴⁴ The President too, ultimately played a significant role in frustrating the efforts of socialists and pacifists. As the war passed through 1917, notes Arthur Link, "Wilson pressed his campaign for peace with mounting intensity...Again and again, he said that Americans had no quarrel with the great German people, admired their accomplishments, and, above all, coveted their friendship."⁴⁵ Wilson conveyed to Americans that the country's only objective in waging war was to achieve peace. But as Link also points out, Wilson "took assiduous pains to make clear that the United States was in the war for its own reasons."⁴⁶ Socialists were at an advantage in this respect, as they found ways to exploit anything that smacked of aggrandizement.

Statements communicated publicly by Wilson and the profits made by private business were monitored closely for any hint of duplicity. For example, Nearing, in an unpublished letter to *The New York Times*, questioned an advertisement that ran in that newspaper's October 3, 1917 edition. Paid for by several major American industries in support of the Liberty Loan Committee, a key revenue generator for the war effort, the advertisement read: "Make the World Safe for Business." Nearing, incensed, wrote, "what does that mean—'Make the World

⁴⁴ Elizabeth McKillen, *Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy, 1914-1924* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 68-69.

⁴⁵ Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War and Peace* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1979), 79.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

Safe for Business?’ It means huge red war profits...It means hell on earth so American business men can ‘get theirs’...That is what I have in mind when I accuse American business interests of using the world crisis as an occasion for making money.”⁴⁷ He repeatedly made the case that profiting from war, indeed, supplying the tools for destruction and international chaos, contradicted not simply moral sensibilities, but liberal democratic ones too.

Nearing especially hoped to expose Wilson’s liberal-internationalism as a ruse and a front for the ruling class to line their pockets at the expense of the small farmer and industrial laborer. Wilson had mostly jettisoned his “New Freedom” program of 1912, discarding the remnants of the “old principles,” to “embrace new ones as the price of retaining power” in 1916.⁴⁸ The New Freedom, according to Link, more and more resembled Theodore Roosevelt’s “New Nationalism” of 1912, which called on the federal government to fuel national initiatives for workers and farmers to gain a greater foothold in the rapidly expanding domestic and international economies. But Wilson found himself in the unenviable position of reconciling “illiberalism at home to reinforce the men at the front.”⁴⁹ Throughout 1918, Nearing tried to zero in on this contradiction, emphasizing that Wilson’s international aims came at the expense of the welfare of the American people. With the People’s Council severely limited by governmental repression and subject to constant mail screenings, and Nearing regularly in court for violating the Espionage Act (for writing *The Great Madness*), a new line of attack was needed. Nearing rallied the support of the radical community around his defense. He pointed out that not only were Americans suffering from class and economic oppression, but they were also victims of verbal and physical repression. Just as he had altered the direction of the pacifist movement earlier in the war through his persistent critique of American capitalism, he did so again on trial.

Nearing came to symbolize the plight of the oppressed, and many of his supporters at the Rand School, students and intellectuals alike, as well as People’s Council members lobbied against the charge on his behalf. Just as the American declaration of war fragmented pacifists in 1917, the “Red Scare” threatened to crush radical sentiment in 1919, and with the conclusion of the war in November, radicals focused all of their energies on fighting persecution. Nearing’s trial became a national sensation, in part because he decided to defend himself, but also because of his popularity among working-class people. The *New York Times* followed the trial throughout 1918 until its conclusion in February 1919. Prior to Nearing’s final words in defense of his actions, the *Times* wrote, “it was a dramatic moment when Nearing, after reviewing in a glimpse his life work, paused and said,

⁴⁷ “Open Letters to Profiteers: An Arraignment of Big Business in Its Relation to World War,” Oct. 4, 1917, SCPC.

⁴⁸ Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 1915-1916*, Vol. IV, 322.

⁴⁹ Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy*, 12.

‘I have done what I could.’ For the time being the matter is in your hands.”⁵⁰ He was eventually acquitted on charges of violating the Espionage Act, but as he recalled in his memoirs, the experience only hardened his opinions about war, exploitation and repression:

There is an old saying that truth is the first casualty in any war. From personal experience I can bear witness that war not only negates truth, decency, and human kindness, but brings disaster also to truth-seekers and those who are devoting their energies to social improvement. War is hell. More than that, war drags human beings from their tasks of building and improving, and pushes them en masse into the category of destroyers and killers.⁵¹

The risks of evaluating a single historical figure during a short time frame seem self-evident: rarely does a person so affect a particular socio-cultural or political milieu as to warrant undivided attention to their life, and rarely does a person so transcend his or her own circumstances as to confer exceptional status to their achievements. However, the benefits quickly outweigh the risks in this case when one considers Nearing’s unique circumstances. In the span of a year, between the spring of 1916 and the spring of 1917, he moved from a prominent position in academia to a position on the front lines of “radical” anti-war activity. He lost his job, his social standing, and his credibility in the conventional world, but gained a preeminent position as a champion of human freedom in the Socialist Party. Although American socialism proved unsuccessful in its bid to overthrow the “hegemonic” forces of capitalism, Nearing succeeded on a wide-scale in challenging pacifists, workers, socialists, intellectuals, and students to think about the complicated questions that war posed for humanity. His legacy, then, resides not necessarily in the popularization of anti-establishment doctrine, but in his ability to transcend a moment, and to lead people in a new direction. The historian Howard Zinn wrote of World War I that, “the rhetoric of the socialists, that it was an ‘imperialist’s war,’ now seems moderate and hardly arguable.”⁵² However, that is only so because radicals like Scott Nearing helped Americans to better understand the pretenses under which the war was being fought.

⁵⁰ *The New York Times*, February 18, 1919.

⁵¹ Nearing, *The Making of a Radical*, 121.

⁵² Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present*, (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001), 360.